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World Health Day 2014
Improve Hygiene, Fight Vector Borne Diseases
Jeff Borchert

Presenter: What is the cause of a rampant outbreak of jiggers in Uganda?

Jeff Borchert: Jiggers are actually a flea, most often caused where people have livestock animals, or they have rats in their homes. And so keeping animals inside of the house, most likely pigs or chickens, these seem to be a cause of jiggers, or sharing areas outside where these types of animals rest under trees can expose yourself to jiggers. We know that smearing the floor with plaster can prevent jiggers, in some cases.

Presenter: And why is it that jiggers mostly affect hands and feet?

Jeff Borchert: Jiggers mostly affect the hands and feet, because these are the areas that are most commonly in touch with the ground. These fleas are found down in the dirt of floors inside and outside of the houses, so any skin that is in routine contact with the soil has the potential to be exposed to jiggers. For example, oftentimes children, sometimes women, will sleep on the floors of houses, and so this can expose them to this flea throughout their body.

Presenter: We have had circumstances where some people have been killed, apparently, by jiggers. Under what circumstances can jiggers kill people?

Jeff Borchert: Well, fleas don't often cause these people to die. Most often, when these fleas burrow into the skin, it can cause a very serious

inflammation reaction to that area, which then causes the wound to become infected, which then could potentially open up that wound for exposure to other pathogens, particularly tetanus. And so, most often it's not the process of the flea burrowing in, it's oftentimes a secondary infection that can cause problems.

But death is very rare when it comes to tungiasis. Most often you'll see loss of limbs, like loss of fingers, loss of toenails, ulcerated wounds, or even gangrene in some extreme cases.

The issue comes when people try to take out the fleas from their feet, and they use, like, a blunt instrument like a pin, or some sort of metal tool, and that tool is not disinfected. And if that's shared between people, then blood borne pathogens can be transferred.

Presenter: What are some of the methods that communities can use to prevent the spread of jiggers?

Jeff Borchert: Jiggers seem to be most often associated with poor hygiene, and so areas, you know, within villages that are unkempt, that are not cleaned up, where there's trash collected, these areas that could attract rats, could attract other animals into those areas.

There is no vaccine for jiggers. The most important thing is to remove the tick, which oftentimes is very, very painful. It's very important to remove the flea with a clean instrument, and then disinfect that area with both a topical disinfectant, and then sometimes if there is severe infection, to use oral antibiotics, and then to clean all the instruments you used to dig that flea out of your skin.

And I think the most important thing is for people to wear shoes, and ideally closed toed shoes. So, sandals that people wear, those can offer some form of protection, but really, a closed toed shoe is the most important thing to prevent yourself from getting jiggers into your feet.